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ABSTRACT

Previous research on the effects of counselor language on clients' perception of the counselor's social influence indicated that counselors using complex language were seen as more expert. Seventy-eight undergraduate and graduate counselor trainees participated in a study to replicate these earlier findings by investigating the effects of counselor language style complexity on perceived counselor social influence, using a counseling sophisticated population. Subjects listened to one of four counseling audiotapes in which counselor language differed semantically and stylistically, and then rated the counselor using the Counselor Rating Form. Analysis of results showed variations of stylistic complexity had no measurable effect on perceived counselor social influence. There was no support for the notion that counseling-sophisticated subjects would respond favorably to stylistically simple counselor language. (JAC)

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The Effects of Stylistic Variations in Language on Perceptions of Social Influence Characteristics in a Counseling Sophisticated Population

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The Effects of Stylistic Variations in Language on Perceptions of Social Influence Characteristics in a Counseling Sophisticated Population

Counseling as a natural language activity has been the focus of much recent research (Bieber, Patton, and Fuhriman, 1977; Patton, Fuhriman, and Bieber, 1977; Meara, Shannon, and Pepinsky, 1979; Meara, Pepinsky, Shannon, and Murray, 1981; Wycoff, Davis, Hector, and Meara, 1982). This research assumes that counseling is a process of social influence mediated, in part, by the natural language used by both the counselor and client (Meara, et al, 1981). Most of these studies have been based on analyses of naturally occurring language.

Wyman (1983), however, investigated the effects of counselor language on perceptions of counselor social influence by manipulating the semantic and stylistic components of counselor language. Counselor responses in her study, recorded on four audiotapes, differed as follows: semantically, the counselor used either state verbs (which define a non-causal relationship between, or a condition of, persons or things) or action verbs (which define a causal relationship initiated by an agent) (Meara, et al., 1981); stylistically, the counselor used either simple or complex language, measured by the number of phrases per clause and the total number of words per interview. Measuring perceived social influence by use of the Counselor Rating Form (CRF; Barak & LaCrosse, 1975), Wyman (1983) found significance for stylistic complexity: counselors using stylistically complex language were rated more expert than counselors

using stylistically simple language.

Because many counselor training programs encourage simple rather than complex counselor responses, Wyman (1983) suggests that "sophisticated" subjects might be less favorably influenced by the complexity of counselor language than were the undergraduate liberal arts majors used as subjects in her study. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to replicate Wyman's study with a counseling sophisticated population.

Specifically, because Wyman (1983) found no significance for effects from counselor verb types, this study was limited to an investigation of the effects of stylistic complexity on perceived counselor social influence. The hypothesis under investigation follows: counselor trainee subjects will rate the social influence of counselors using stylistically simple language more favorably than the social influence of counselors using stylistically complex language.

Method

This systematic replication of Wyman's (1983) study differed only in subject population and manner of random assignment to treatment conditions. The subjects were 78 undergraduate and graduate students (58 female, 14 male) from the College of Education at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville who volunteered to participate, some for course credit. All subjects had taken at least one course in counseling theories and techniques; many were pre-practicum students who had taken more than one course in counseling. Other than

recruitment, which was done by the principal investigator, all contacts with subjects were by persons naive to the study.

Subjects were requested to go to the Educational Media Center of the College of Education to listen to one of four counseling audiotapes in which counselor language differed semantically and stylistically (Wyman, 1983). Upon arriving at the Media Center, subjects signed a sequential, subjects list which specified the random presentation of the four treatment conditions (audiotapes) before being given the appropriate audiotape, a set of headphones, and a packet containing instructions, a subjects release form, and the CRF. After listening to one of the four audiotapes, subjects rated the counselor using the CRF.

The four stimulus audiotapes, the same ones used by Wyman (1983), were recorded using two actors who read from scripts in which topic and client responses were identical. Counselor responses, however, differed in semantic and stylistic linguistic features. Wyman (1983) reports procedural checks on the stimulus audiotapes performed using the Computer Assisted Language Analysis System (CALAS), a computer program designed to analyze natural language according to case grammar, a grammar which classifies the structures of natural language according to the semantic relationships between what are traditionally called nouns and verbs. As was stated before, this study only investigated the effects of variation in stylistic complexity.

Results and Discussion

A one way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was

performed to determine the effect of stylistic complexity of counselor responses on perceptions of counselor social influence by counseling sophisticated subjects. Using the Wilk's lambda criterion, the MANOVA results indicated no significant multivariate effect for stylistic complexity, $F(3,68) = .04$, $p < .98$. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the dependent variable means at both levels of stylistic complexity. Because variations of stylistic complexity

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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had no measurable effect on counselor social influence, no support was found for the hypothesis that counselor trainee subjects would rate the social influence of counselors using stylistically simple language more favorably than the social influence of counselors using stylistically complex language.

Several features of the experimental design may help account for these non-significant results. To begin with, although Wyman (1983) performed procedural checks on the independent variables manipulated in the stimulus audiotapes, she does not report procedural checks of the tapes as representative of counseling sessions, although she refined the audiotapes in two pilot studies. In all four audiotapes, client responses are identical, only counselor language changes. Because subjects listen to both counselor and client responses, the question can be raised about how well the audiotapes simulate an

actual counseling session, particularly given some evidence that counselor and client quickly track each other in stylistic features (Meara et al., 1979; Meara et al., 1981; Bieber et al., 1977). That is, although subjects were requested to rate the counselor, they may have responded to such global features of the audiotapes as artificiality and stiltedness in the interaction between counselor and client.

Evidence for this conjecture can be found in the data: expertness and trustworthiness scores clustered together; attractiveness scores, however, were significantly higher, indicating less attractiveness. Table I summarizes the results of a post hoc Duncan's Multiple Range Test performed after a one way ANOVA found significant differences between the means of expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness scores. Convincing evidence, then, which echoes Wyman's (1983)

Insert Table I about here

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findings, can be found to suggest that subjects perceived the counselor on the audiotapes as unattractive.

One explanation, then, for non-significant results could be that subject perception of counselor unattractiveness may have been so salient that any differences attributable to the stylistic complexity of counselor language was not noticed. This explanation, however, rests on tenuous assumptions. First, this explanation assumes that subject ratings of counselors in this study are, in fact, ratings of

counselor social influence. Influence occurs over time; subjects rated counselors after one exposure. A more accurate assessment might be that subjects rated their initial impressions of the counselor, not their perception of the counselor's social influence.

Second, and more importantly, this explanation assumes that an empirical link can be found to tie the social influence of counselors to the language they use. This assumption has only marginal support, for at least two reasons. One, social influence is not a construct with clear boundaries, as the current discussion about whether social influence is a one, two, or three factor construct attests (Corrigan, Dell, Lewis & Schmidt, 1980); in this study, in fact, the three subscores of the CRF, expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness, were highly correlated, all above .69. Table II summarizes the correlations among the scores. Two, social influence may not be a

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Insert Table II about here

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construct in which theoretical ties have been made between the global construct of social influence and the actual bits of data any individual or groups of individuals use to form judgments about social influence; most likely, different individuals use different bits of data to make judgments about social influence.

The question remains whether the stylistic complexity of counselor language is one of the bits of data that contribute to

perceptions of counselor social influence. This study found no support for the hypothesis that counseling sophisticated subjects would rate counselors who use a minimum of phrases per clause more socially influential than counselors who use many phrases per clause. In Wyman's (1983) study, on the other hand, naive subjects rated counselors who used many phrases per clause as more expert than counselors who used few phrases per clause. A comparison of the results of these two studies suggests that counseling sophisticated subjects differ from naive subjects in their perceptions of counselor social influence. In other words, although the counseling sophisticated subjects of this study did not respond favorably to stylistically simple counselor language, neither did they respond favorably to stylistically complex counselor language.

A second explanation of the non-significant results, then, is that for the counseling sophisticated subjects in this study, stylistic complexity of counselor language may not have entered into their judgments of counselor social influence. A speculation is that counselor training may have sensitized sophisticated subjects to features of counselor behavior possibly overlooked by naive subjects.

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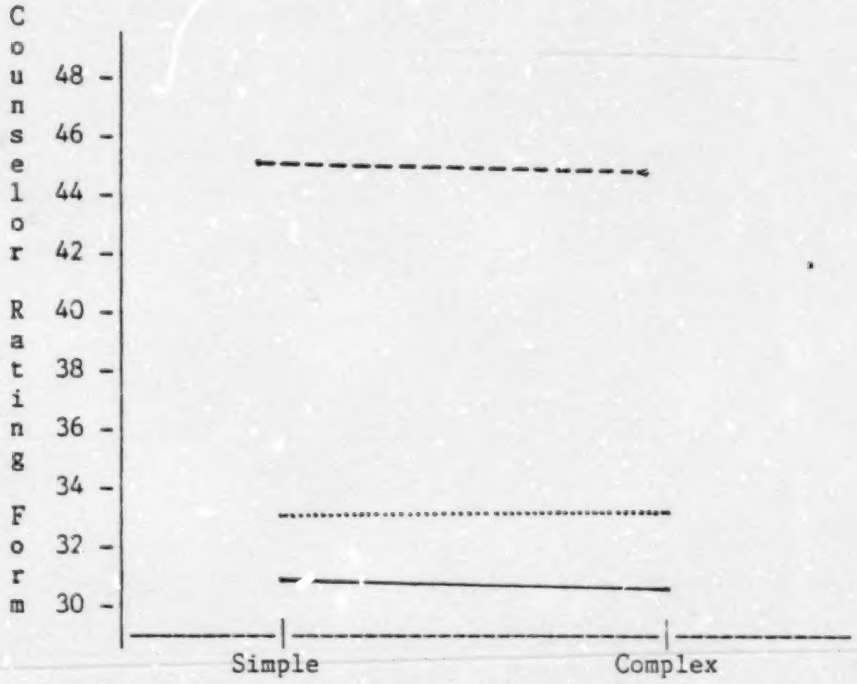

Figure 1. Dependent Variables as a Function of Syntactic Style.

NOTE. Solid line represents expertness; dotted line represents trustworthiness; and broken line represents attractiveness. Low scores indicate a more favorable rating than do high scores.

TABLE I

RESULTS OF DUNCAN'S MULTIPLE RANGE TEST OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEAN SCORES OF COUNSELOR EXPERTNESS, TRUSTWORTHINESS, AND ATTRACTIVENESS

Dependent Variable	Mean	Grouping[a]
Attractiveness	51.86	A
Expertness	35.49	B
Trustworthiness	35.32	B

[a]Means with the same letter are not significantly different.

TABLE II

SPEARMAN CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR MEAN SCORES OF COUNSELOR EXPERTNESS, TRUSTWORTHINESS, AND ATTRACTIVENESS

	Expertness	Trustworthiness	Attractiveness
Expertness	1.00		
Trustworthiness	0.79	1.00	
Attractiveness	.69	.83	1.00